



CHAPTER VII

RENTS, WAGES AND PRICES

Owing to the smallness of the population as compared with the area of the district and the amount of cultivable land still remaining unoccupied, the rates of rent paid by *raiya*s holding direct from landlords are very low as compared with the rates prevailing in the neighbouring districts. The district is a permanently settled one, and no general cadastral survey of it has ever been made. It is consequently somewhat difficult to ascertain with accuracy what the prevailing rates of rent are, and quite impossible to calculate the number of holdings or the average area of land per holding. From an examination of the settlement records of 8 small private estates with a total area of 14,369 acres, recently surveyed and settled under the Bengal Tenancy Act, it would appear that the different classes of *raiya*s, the average rent per cultivated acre payable by, and the average size of holding in possession of each class, are as follows :—

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Class of cultivator	Average area of cultivated land per holding.	Average rent per cultivated acre.
	Acres.	Rs. a. p.
Raiyats at fixed rates or fixed rents	7.29	1 13 0
Settled raiyats	3.15	1 15 0
Occupancy	2.54	1 12 0
Non-occupancy	2.30	1 5 0
Under-raiyats	.26	2 15 0
Total	3.10	1 15 0

Of *raiya*t holding their land direct from the landlord, by far the largest class are the occupancy *raiya*t or *jotedars*. Non-occupancy *raiya*t or tenants-at-will are comparatively few, as under the Bengal Tenancy Act the mere fact of having held land in a village for 12 years gives a cultivator occupancy right in respect of all lands taken up by him in that village, and the landlords seldom put obstacles in the way of their tenants acquiring such rights. The rents quoted are all over rents. Except in the case of under-*raiya*t, no distinction is made in the rent of different classes of land in a village nor is any account taken of the kind of crop to be grown. The average rate per acre is rather higher in the southern portion of the district than in the northern, being Rs. 2 to Rs. 2-12 as against Re. 1-8 to Rs. 2. The reason for this probably is that the southern portion of the district being mostly *khia*r land was most suitable for winter paddy, at one time the only important crop, and was in consequence more valuable than the northern portion which is mostly *pali*. With the rise in importance of the jute crop the value of the latter class of land has, however, greatly increased and at the present day is quite equal to that of *khia*r. Under-*raiya*t on the other hand, have to pay very much higher rents, and the rent, when payable in money, varies according to the class of land and the crop grown on it. The rents paid by such under-*raiya*t, varies from Re. 1-8 per acre for poor lands to as much as Rs. 20 an acre for the best-jute lands. Lands suitable for the cultivation of tobacco sometimes let at as much as Rs. 28 an acre. Under-*raiya*t, who pay a money rent are usually termed

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chukanidars. A numerous class of cultivators, called *adhiars*, to whom the term under-*raiya*t is not properly applicable, pay their rent in kind, the *raiya*t, whose land they cultivate, taking half the crop. This procedure works very well in practice, as in a bad year the loss is distributed between the *raiya*t and the *adhiar*, while in a good one the former shares in the profits. Cultivators holding otherwise than direct from the superior landlord acquire no rights in the land they cultivate, however long they may hold possession of it.

There is a great demand for labourers in the district and in consequence the rates of wages are very high. The causes of this are two-fold. The cultivable area of the district is large as compared with the population, and of recent years the prices of agricultural produce have risen to such an extent that agriculture has become a very profitable occupation. It pays the cultivators to take up large holdings and cultivate them in the main by hired labour. Winter rice, which is by far the most important crop in the district, is commonly harvested by gangs of up-country coolies who get as much as 8 annas a day and their food for this particular work. These are of course immigrant labourers paid at exceptional rates for a particular job, but the ordinary agricultural labourer also is by no means badly off. His wages all the year round work out at something like Rs. 5 a month and his food, as compared with Rs. 2 a month and his food in 1870, a considerable advance, though we must not overlook the fact that the purchasing power of the rupee has decreased somewhat since then. The ordinary cooly, who finds employment at railway stations and in doing odd jobs in towns, gets 6 annas a day while the artisan class also have benefitted by the rise in wages and we find common carpenters and masons nowadays not content with less than 10 to 12 annas a day, as compared with half his amount 30 or 40 years ago. Carters are a numerous class in this district. Generally they own their own carts and bullocks and earn Re. 1 to Re. 1-4 a day as cart hire. When the carter, however, is only a hired man who drives his employer's cart, he gets Rs. 6 to Rs. 7 a month plus his food.

As a result chiefly of the gradual improvement in communications which has taken place in the last 40 or 50 years, the prices of agricultural produce have risen steadily, the rise being most marked after the opening of the railway

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between 1884 and 1891. The changes in the price of common rice will best illustrate this. To go back to the earliest times of which we have any reliable record, Buchanan Hamilton quotes the average price of common rice in his day (1808) as Re. 1 per maund. The maund referred to contained some 48 seers of 80 tolas. Prices rose considerably during the following half century and the average price in 1861, which was apparently a year of plentiful harvests, is found to be 32 seers to the rupee. In the next ten years there was little change, the average price in 1871 being 31 seers to the rupee. After the famine year of 1874 prices began to show a definite upward tendency. About 22 seers to the rupee seems to have been the average price in an ordinary year, though in 1881 the number of seers purchased for the rupee again reached 32. This now, however, meant a condition of abnormal cheapness. In 1884, which does not seem to have been in the ordinary sense a year of scarcity, the number of seers purchaseable for the rupee had fallen to 15, and during the decade ending 1901 $13\frac{1}{2}$ seers was the average. In 1906, 1907 and 1908 the price of rice reached an abnormally high figure, the average prices being $8\frac{1}{2}$, $7\frac{3}{4}$, and $7\frac{1}{2}$ seers respectively to the rupee. In 1910, which was a year exceptionally favourable to the agriculturist, the average price fell again to $13\frac{1}{4}$ seers to the rupee. It is improbable, however, that this cheap rate will be maintained. The price of rice in years of scarcity further illustrates the influence which improved communications have exerted on prices. In 1865 the average price was 15 seers to the rupee; in 1874, the year of the famine, the price per rupee was 14 seers. In 1897, the year of comparatively scanty harvests, it was $9\frac{1}{2}$ seers per rupee, while in 1908, which in respect of failure of crops might compare with 1874, the price was $7\frac{1}{2}$ seers per rupee. This rise in prices does not affect the cultivating classes, who, except on the rare occasions of failure of the crops, can grow more than sufficient to supply their own needs, while the good market for their surplus produce makes for their prosperity. To these a year of comparatively short out-turn with low prices. Landless labourers also share in this prosperity, as work is abundant. It is otherwise with the non-agricultural middle classes, generally known as *bhadralok*, from whose ranks the professions and the Government services are recruited. Notwithstanding higher salaries and improved prospects these are

steadily deteriorating in prosperity, and the complaint is general amongst them that they are worse off than their fathers were on half their income.

The majority of Population live by agriculture and succeed in making a fairly comfortable living out of it. Dinajpur is one of the principal rice-producing districts in the province, and a large portion of the crop is available for export. The crop very rarely fails, and the year 1873-74 is the only year on record in which a serious famine occurred, though partial failures of the crop have happened now and then. On such occasions quantities of rice are imported from Bengal and Burma and the market price of this staple differs little from the price in ordinary years. A century ago the people generally were both poor and improvident. The only crop in the district worth mentioning was rice, and owing to the low price obtainable for this locally, and to want of facilities for export, the cultivators though not lacking in food, had little ready money and could seldom afford luxuries. A large portion of the district was under jungle and the profits to be made from agriculture were not sufficient to induce the local cultivators, always averse to hard labour, to go to the trouble of clearing and bringing it under cultivation. At the same time, the prevalent practice of early marriages and their fondness for spending money on these and other ceremonies, led them to involve themselves and their descendants in debt, and frequently reduced them to the most abject poverty. In the course of the succeeding half century, with improved communications and the consequent rise in the price of food-stuffs, especially rice, the condition of the people underwent a change for the better. Major Sherwill writing about 1860, says: "The social condition of the agricultural class has greatly improved of late years by the enhanced value of rice and all other agricultural produce. The ryots are the principal gainers by the unprecedented rise in the price of grain, by which, in many instances, their profits are more than doubled. The zamindars, the only prosperous section of the community, are also great gainers, on account of waste lands and jungles being brought under cultivation, and the ryots, being in more prosperous circumstances, have increased facility in paying up their rents. Mutations and desertions of ryots are less frequent; in a word, the prospects of all have improved, but still the ryots have no pretension to wealth or

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affluence. Although not rich, the *raiyyats* are more independent, and in easier circumstances than the peasantry of most other nations, and although often oppressed by the zamindars, who enrich themselves at the expenses of the *raiyyats*, they still have sufficient to support themselves and families. Few experience the pangs of hunger, as our own countrymen do in times of distress, or during a severe winter. They may wholly abstain from labour for weeks or even months together, and still manage to feed and clothe themselves and families. Their wants are few and easily supplied: rice, dall, salt, oil and tobacco supply them all. They suffer somewhat from cold at night in December, January and February, but at other seasons of the year they require scarcely any clothing at all." In the fifty years which have elapsed since this was written the material condition of the people has continued steadily to improve. The prices of food-stuffs have continued to rise, trade has expanded, the waste lands of the district have been brought under cultivation by settlers from the Santal Parganas, Chota Nagpur and Behar, and, last but not least, jute has come into prominence as an easily-grown and profitable crop. As a consequence of all this, the number of cultivators who have risen from the position of *raiyyats* to that of well-to-do tenure-holders employing hired labour, and from the position of agricultural labourers working for hire to that of *raiyyats* with occupancy rights, is very great. Many persons allege, indeed, that the prosperity arising from the large profits made from jute in recent years is largely a fictitious prosperity. There is more money in the country, it is true, but ready cash has brought extravagance in its train and the people are little better off than before. This may be true to a certain extent, but this ready money which the cultivator has at his disposal has been of inestimable benefit to the poorer classes, such as agricultural labourers, metal-workers, etc., as the man who formerly had to do all his work himself, and had little cash to spare for luxuries, can now afford to employ labourers to do a portion at least of his work for him, and to substitute iron and brass utensils for the homely earthen ones he formerly used.

The good prices obtainable nowadays for food-stuffs have induced the cultivators, especially in the northern portion of the district, to abandon the old practice of always keeping a store of rice, sufficient for a year's consump-

tion at least, in hand. After harvesting the winter rice crop, the *raiyyat*, tempted by the high price he can get for his produce, and by his need for ready money to pay the rent or spend in the annual fair in the neighbourhood, sells almost his whole out-turn and keeps just sufficient to carry him on for a few months till his next *aus* rice crop is ripe, or till the sale of his jute crop brings him in a good supply of cash. If the *aus* rice or jute crop fails, as sometimes happens, he has then to purchase food for himself and his family at a high price and is reduced to considerable straits to carry on till another food crop is available. With the general increase in prosperity the relations between tenant and landlord have improved. In the early days of the British administration many of the landlords were new men, not of the true zamindar class, and some were foreigners. Such men were naturally out of sympathy with their tenants and rack-renting was common. At the same time the cultivators were poor and had difficulty in paying even a moderate rent, and the desertion of holdings was frequent. At the present day harsh and exacting landlords are rare, and the cultivator, by nature a law-abiding, peaceable creature enough, makes little difficulty about paying his rent, which, as a rule, is reasonable. When times are bad owing to failure of crops, most landlords have the sense to see that it pays them better to give time to the *raiyyats* to pay their rent after the harvesting of the next crop, than to resort to the courts and drive them off the land by selling them up. Litigation, of course, as almost everywhere in India, is too freely resorted to, but the waste of money on this form of amusement is not nearly so great as in many of the districts further east. It must not be supposed that the rise in the prices of agricultural produce has benefited all classes of the community alike. Artisans, merchants, traders and members of the legal profession have shared in the profits of the cultivators. The condition of the zamindars, on the other hand, is not so good as the increased value of their estates would lead one to expect. Of these some are absentees living in Calcutta and elsewhere, and comparatively few take an intelligent interest in the management of their estates. The result is that their *amlas* grow rich at their expense, while the lavish expenditure considered necessary on the occasion of marriages or other ceremonies, together with the waste of money on litigation, have involved many, who should otherwise be well to do,

in debt. The professional classes, too, to which the ministerial and other officers of Government belong, are the reverse of prosperous. The reason is that while salaries have increased little, if at all, in the last fifty years, the cost of living has gone up enormously, and the competition which has sprung up for posts of every kind has necessitated an expenditure on the education of their children undreamt of in their grandfather's time.

D W E L L -
I N G S

The style of house in which the cultivator lives is still simple and primitive in the extreme. His living house or hut is constructed sometimes on a raised earthen plinth and sometimes on the ground, with wooden or bamboo posts, bamboo mat walls, and a thatched roof. Such partitions as there may be inside are of bamboo matting, and the rafters and crosspieces are generally of bamboo. The cook-house and other out-houses are grouped about the living house to form a homestead or *bari*, and not infrequently the inner premises are surrounded with a high fence of split bamboo. In parts of the district where suitable earth is obtainable or the inhabitants are foreigners from the west, the walls of the houses are built of mud. Occasionally a well-to-do cultivator or a small tenure-holder has a more pretentious dwelling with corrugated iron roof and mud-plastered walls, and merchants and *mahajans* commonly have houses of this kind. The land-holders mostly live in old-fashioned *dalans* or masonry buildings surrounded by the huts of their retainers and by, perhaps, a family temple or two. Here and there a zamindar may be found living in a more modern building of semi-European pattern, erected probably at one time or another when the estate was under the management of the Court of Wards. With the exception of the few ancient buildings still in use as places of worship, mosques and temples are built in the most ordinary style and have no pretensions to beauty. They are commonly constructed of masonry or sun-dried bricks, mud-plastered and white-washed, and have sometimes corrugated iron roofs.

FURNITURE

The furniture in the ordinary cultivator's house neither costly nor complicated. It consists of some brass utensils, such as plates (*thala*) cups (*bati*), pots (*lota*), some sleeping mats and coarse quilts and some earthen cooking vessels. The poorer sort sleep on the ground and the more affluent on bamboo *machans*, or *charpoys*. In the *bazars* enamelled iron is rapidly taking the place of brass for plates

and drinking vessels, as being cheaper and cleaner though not so lasting. Here, too, the ubiquitous kerosene oil tin is put to a variety of uses, chief among which is carrying or storing water. Every better class house is provided with a *baiithakhana* or reception room, in which the master of the houses entertains visitors, furnished with mats and low wooden stools, and perhaps a chair or two, and many of the land-holders and gentry have European furniture in their house, and use tables, chairs, beds, dressing tables, etc.

The diet of the people is largely a vegetable one, and consists principally of rice, pulses, vegetables, chillies, and salt. The flesh of fowls, pigeons, goats, and sheep is occasionally eaten by the Muhammadans, and that of goats and ducks by the Hindus. The low class Hindus and Santals sometimes keep and eat pigs. Mustard oil is in general use for cooking. Sweetmeats made of sugar and *ghi*, and milk in various forms, such as curds (*dahi*), are consumed by all classes that can afford them. Fresh fish is not everywhere available and there is no great consumption of dried fish, which forms such a staple article of diet in some parts of the country. Most villagers grow their own vegetable, such as brinjals, pumpkins, yams, beans, and radishes, and a few plantain trees are a necessary adjunct to every homestead. Plantain pulp mixed with milk is frequently given to infants and forms a palatable and nourishing food. All classes chew *pan*, a mixture of areca-nut, catechu, and lime wrapped up in *pan* or betel leaves. Amongst the lower orders tobacco is sometimes added to the mixture. Opium and *ganja* are used for smoking, the former chiefly by the indigenous and the latter by the foreign population.

Amongst the lower orders, both Hindus and Muhammadans, dress in much the same style, in *dhoti* and *chadar*, but the large and growing sect of Naya Musulmans, found scattered all over the district, affect a kind of *lungi* or cloth worn round the waist and reaching halfway down the calf. This is generally of a red check pattern and is surmounted by a short jacket or coat. Many of these people wear a fez. Both Hindu and Muhammadan women wear a single coarse cloth called *chautha* wound round the body above the breasts and reaching to the calf of the leg. Sometimes, however, two cloths are worn, one reaching from the waist to the calf and the other round the upper part of the body. As a rule, nothing is worn on the head. Amongst the



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many Beharis in this district the cloth, called *sari*, is longer and looser and is so arranged at the waist as to have heavy pleats in front. The Santal women wear a similar cloth, but of a much more skimpy description. It barely reaches to their knees and one end of it is flung over one shoulder and across the breast from behind. This garment is either entirely red in colour or has a red border. The Paliya and Rajbansi women wear their cloth, generally a coarse cotton one of local manufacture, in much the same fashion as the Mech and Kachari women of Assam, *viz.*, wound once round the body and folded across the breast. The end is tucked in at the side. It has an ugly and slovenly appearance and the cloth requires constant re-folding and tucking in. Sometimes the ends of it are sewn together and the garment slipped over the head like a sort of petticoat. Women of the cultivating classes, with the exception of Behari women, do not wear much in the way of jewellery, but in the *bazars* a variety of silver ornaments, such as bangles, armlets, finger, toe, nose, and ear-rings, waist-bands, and anklets may be seen. Gold jewellery is not much in evidence. The men of all classes carry umbrellas, and large hats made of split bamboo with immense brims are in common use amongst the labourers in the fields to protect them from sun and rain. In Dinajpur town and some of the larger villages the better classes of Hindus wear the semi-European dress peculiar to the *bhadralok* all over Bengal. This consists of shoes and socks, the former of European pattern but usually of native manufacture, a loose *dhoti* almost touching the ground in front, a light coat of silk alpaca, or cotton, and a *chadar*, often of brilliant hue, thrown round the neck and shoulders. Muhammadan gentlemen generally wear a long-skirted coat buttoned to the throat in front, tight cotton trousers, and a fez.